Get the human side of your business in sync with the digital

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Get the human side of your business in sync with the digital

By Professor Jim Saker

As I sat at home one evening going through the large number of extraneous emails that seem to mysteriously appear in my inbox, I spotted an advert for what looked like quite an interesting conference on autonomous cars taking place in the US.

I casually filled in the form that allowed me to request more details. No sooner had I clicked the send button than my mobile rang with a call from the conference organisers in the US, telling me that I should sign up straight away or I would miss the early bird discount.

I was impressed by their enthusiasm, but was slightly taken back by the speed of the response and that it arrived in the form of verbal contact. Maybe it's my mind-set, but when I contact someone, I normally expect to get the response through the same medium. The other disconnect for me was that the website was actually quite refined and low-key, totally different to the brash and aggressive salesperson who was haranguing me from Detroit.

One of the most interesting challenges in marketing is the ability to have an integrated marketing communication system that is consistent across its whole range.

I recently attempted to order a taxi in Leicester to pick up a colleague in London and bring them back to the East Midlands. The website of the company I used was very professional, gave an indication on price and suggested that they had years of experience. I dutifully rang them and spoke to a gentleman who sounded a little gruff, but seemed to know what he was talking about.

Things started to unravel slightly when he said they needed a 50% deposit and asked if I could drop this off. Having eventually found the establishment, on a run-down industrial estate in the west of Leicester, I was taken upstairs to a smoke-filled room where three emergent lifeforms sat in hoodies watching Friends on daytime TV. They assured me that a driver would turn up at St. Pancras.

The taxi did turn up, late, and it appeared it was the driver's first visit to London and he had little or no idea of how to navigate the streets of the capital. My colleague suggested that we try another taxi company in future, perhaps one without such a smart website.

Over the past few years, the retail automotive sector has spent a lot of time and money looking at digital forms of communication, both on the web and in the dealership. The advances that have been made are staggering.

The problem, however, is that unless you are going to do everything online, like Amazon, there is going to be human interaction somewhere in the supply chain. It is at this point that the best digital communication strategy can come crashing to the ground.

Last month, I spoke at the AM/IMI People Conference and was struck by the transformation taking place in attitudes within our sector. I believe the industry is taking employee development and training a lot more seriously than it has done before. However, we still face a major problem with the image of the sector, dating back to 'Arthur Daley'.

I thought the image of car retailers had improved until I read a US Public Policy poll that put them as less popular than colonoscopies, cockroaches, Donald Trump and France. We did, however, manage to beat the Kardashians, North Korea, the ebola virus and gonorrhoea, which was reassuring. Although the poll was light-hearted, it did reproduce a stereotype that we have been fighting to overcome.

With the rise in the level of sophistication in the product that is sold, combined with the more professional use of digital and social media, there is going to be increasing pressure to ensure that the human interface matches the expectations delivered by the digital world. We need to be able to recruit increasingly talented people who are able to embrace the change in the forms of digital communication, but also have the right skills and understanding to deal with customers in a way that reinforces and supports the digital message. These talented people need to be managed in such a way that they can see a career path through our organisations.

At the AM/IMI conference I was fascinated to listen to Peter Smyth describe how the Swansway Group creates a real sense of employee engagement. Its open-door policy and care for its employees helped to place it in the Sunday Times Best Companies to Work For list. (Read more on page 77)

Getting the right person with the right attitude allows a company to progress in the digital space and build brand awareness, while ensuring the impression given on the web is then delivered at the customer point of contact. The need to continue to invest in both the technology and the people is going to be increasingly important as this progresses. Getting one out of sync with the other will cause major problems.

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